



# Bijoux in Bhutan

Sonam Rabgye, a Bhutanese jewelry designer on the cusp of a breakout year, talks about her inspirations and her client list, which includes a queen and a duchess you may have heard of.

BY ASHLEY NIEDRINGHAUS



**THE ENDLESS KNOT NECKLACE**, made of gold and diamonds, is a grouping of eight interlocking auspicious symbols, and the amulet certainly brought luck to its designer, Sonam Ragbye, whose eponymous jewelry brand is putting Bhutan under a halogen limelight.

Since childhood, Rabgye aspired to be a fashion designer and was always filling sketchbooks and doodling in the margins of notebooks during class. “My conservative family encouraged a more stable career, so I decided to sketch on the side,” she says, but after spending years on the business and developmental sides of environmental NGOs—work she describes as “bureaucratic”—she returned to Bhutan in 2014 with the

goal of improving the lives of her compatriots through jewelry.

“I am Bhutanese at heart,” says Rabgye, though the 33-year-old spent her childhood relocating every half-decade as her diplomat father moved the family from their native Bhutan to India, the U.S., Thailand, and a few other places on the map. The adventurous spirit of Rabgye’s jewelry brings innovation, functionality and a touch of the avant-garde to customary Bhutanese style. Take the collection of brooches she crafted to accompany the *kira*, the country’s ankle-length national dress that is worn with a kimono-style jacket known as a *togo*.

“As parts of Bhutan start to modernize and people consume social media, they want to go places like Bangkok and Hong Kong to shop, but much of the population is still rural and wearing customary jewelry,” she says. “My designs are for the Bhutanese city girl; pieces rooted in tradition with a touch of modern style.” Her newest line is a contemporary take on the *dzi* (pronounced *zee*) bead, a rare and sacred amulet that is passed between generations to help ward off evil. “I was inspired by the myth and mysteriousness of this bead, so I designed a silver version with colors representing the four elements of nature: water, wind, air and fire.”

Business was steady with bespoke orders until she received a request >>

FROM TOP LEFT: Designer Sonam Ragbye; Ragbye takes inspiration from Bhutan’s traditions and culture, such as prayer wheels; a crystal encrusted Sonam Ragbye name necklace in Dzongkha language.







last year—on Instagram of all places—from a member of the entourage of Jetsun Pema, the queen of Bhutan, looking to commission a piece for her majesty. This VIP customer was satisfied and went on to order three other pieces for visiting heads of state before placing an ornate order for an *Endless Knot*, which represents harmony and compassion. The purchase, Rabgye assumed, was for the queen, but while traveling to Singapore to promote her line, her phone was flooded with messages of well-wishes and photos of Kate Middleton wearing Rabgye's creation, which the queen had given her as a gift. "I was shaking; jumping up and down in my hotel room," she says with an obvious elation in her voice even a year later. "I can't remember a time I was that excited. I went out for a big, boozy dinner with friends in Singapore to celebrate."

Most items donned by the fashion plate Duchess of Cambridge instantly sell out, and Rabgye saw a boom in business, but she remains firm in her belief of handcrafting each piece. Instead of letting the fame go to her head, she partnered with Gyalyum Charitable Trust (GCT), a foundation that supports craftswomen through employment and marketing. Rabgye sells most of her pieces at GCT's handicrafts shop in Thimphu, where 20 percent of the



FROM LEFT: The placid landscapes of Bhutan; the Duchess of Cambridge during her trip to the country; the gold and diamond *Endless Knot*, also known as the "Kate Middleton Necklace."

sales goes to the charity. "I am an introvert by nature," she muses when asked if she's well-known in Bhutan. "My creative process is about giving back and creating something that is meaningful to each customer."

Rabgye's pieces are made with gems from Burma, and other metals are sourced from Thailand and India. "My pieces are a lot like me," she says. "They come from around the world but always have Bhutan—its soul, customs, nature, religion—at heart." [fb.com/sonamrabgye](https://fb.com/sonamrabgye) jewellery; from US\$100. +

## Shopping with Sonam

THREE OF RABGYE'S FAVORITE SPOTS TO BUY MADE-IN-BHUTAN BLING.



**THE CRAFT GALLERY**  
Located in central Thimphu, this creative hub is a marketplace for crafts and locally made items—including Sonam Rabgye jewelry—run by the Gyalyum Charitable Trust, who give a portion of the proceeds to marginalized people of Bhutan. [gyalyum.org/organizations/craft-gallery](http://gyalyum.org/organizations/craft-gallery).



**VAST (VOLUNTARY ARTISTS' STUDIO THIMPHU)** Art lovers will find the mix of traditional and contemporary works of Bhutanese art at reasonable prices appealing. The shop is a vocational training center for young artists, and they promote social awareness through exhibits and local events. [vast-bhutan.org](http://vast-bhutan.org).



**CRAFT BAZAAR** More than 80 huts line the street, selling a range of handicrafts, including silk textiles, embroidery, wood sculptures, handmade paper products and traditional souvenirs. The initiative that runs the market has a socio-economic bent that promotes the sustainability of local crafts. *Nordzin Lam, Thimphu.*

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: STEFAN AUTH/GETTY IMAGES; SAMIR HUSSEIN/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF SONAM RABGYE; COURTESY OF KINGDOMOFBHUTAN/TRAVEL; COURTESY OF VOLUNTARY ARTISTS' STUDIO THIMPHU; COURTESY OF MR. KENCHO WANGDI